

## Oscie Whatley (1923-2005)

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On Wednesday, July 26, the family and friends of Oscie B. Whatley, Jr. gathered in a chapel to view him in his casket and comfort each other in our grief over losing such an extraordinary friend. He was dressed in the new coat and tie outfit that he'd bought for his 60<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary in November of 2003, and he was wearing his glasses. Tweed jacket, going toward charcoal brown, purple shirt, subdued tie with some hint of silver in it...he looked like my friend sleeping. Flowers were everywhere in the room, and there were two daylily blossoms in the casket with him. At the side of the chapel was a table flanked by large displays of photos from Oscie's long life (he was 82). The chapel was filled with people.

On the table were Oscie's latest AHS awards, an Honorable Mention for STRUNG OUT, which many garden judges saw for the first time at the national convention in St. Louis last year; and an award for the best article on hybridizing to appear in a regional publication in 2004. (I took these to Oscie in the hospital on the last day that I saw him alive, and he was not awake to know that I was there again.) A copy of the MoKanOk Magazine was open to the profile I had written about Oscie last year.

Amid all the family photos of Oscie was a single floral portrait, which I guessed was the sparkling white daylily with a green-gold edge that he named DOROTHY WHATLEY for his wife in 2004. It will be years before that special daylily comes to market, but even as a third-year seedling it was a certain registration, and Oscie decided to name and register it long before its release so that Dorothy could know that he'd given her his best from the garden as he had in every other way.



I knew Oscie by reputation before I moved to St. Louis ten years ago, and I called him and introduced myself after my job interview and job offer. When I got into town he took me to a meeting of the club he helped found, the Greater St. Louis Daylily Society. At that first meeting the club voted him a lifetime member of its board. The following spring he populated my first temporary garden at the place I was renting. “Do you have my PERSIMMON PUNCH? How about BRAVE ONE? I can’t give you this one because it’s brand new and I don’t have enough, but do you have JULIETTE WHATLEY MEMORIAL?” All of these were gifts from the man who wanted me to feel welcome in a new place.

I don’t speak Spanish, but I knew Oscie had some knowledge of it, having grown up in Texas, so after a while I got into the habit of greeting him on the phone as “Señor Whatley,” or just “Señor!!” He always seemed tickled about that, and would invariably reply with a phrase of greeting in Spanish, which I didn’t understand, and I would gamely follow up with something I hoped would pass for Spanish, even if it contained a few Italian words. This became our little ritual game, which he would sometimes vary by saying “Hello, Michael” before I could get a word out. Caller ID was part of the game.

Among the people in the Greater St. Louis Daylily Society, I have the shortest tenure as Oscie’s “best friend.” Some people have assumed I was his best friend because I wrote profiles of him, but the truth is that Oscie Whatley didn’t rank his friends. Every one of us could rightly claim the status of “best friend,” and that is what Oscie should be remembered for.

A gesture of friendship from Oscie was always infused with a spirit of excessive generosity that he credited to his mother’s influence. She’s the Etta Mae for whom he named a rose pink daylily a few years ago. He carried her facial features into the world, and passed them on to his son Richard, and on to his grandson Michael, who is the spitting image of the young Oscie in a sailor’s uniform or pilot gear back in the time he came to St. Louis to train for service in the European Theatre of Operations.

During that time Oscie met and married Dorothy Henderson, and with her he had a remarkable and unexpected encounter with an ultimate mystery that one might call “God.” You see, they both were diagnosed with cancer within the same month, during the Christmas season that began with their 59<sup>th</sup> anniversary and, following harrowing treatments, they arrived at their 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary as “survivors.” I remember visiting Oscie the day before the very risky surgery that would attempt to remove a tumor of his pancreas and perhaps part of his stomach, and that would, if “successful,” make him an instant diabetic. His son, Richard, was sitting with him outside on the patio, his workspace during garden season, but in March just a nice place to enjoy the onset of Spring. We all knew the steep odds. How do you say “goodbye” to a friend who might not survive the next day? Drawing on my reserves of Spanish, I said, “Vaya con Dios, Amigo!” and left matters in the hands of God, where they reside at all times anyway. That phrase became my parting word every time I thought I might never see him alive again.

Oscie was trained in science and loved the science of genetics and soil composition. When he learned how to accomplish tetraploid conversions of diploid daylilies, he codified his methods and created chemistry kits which he sold at cost to anyone who wanted to learn.

One of Oscie's contributions to daylilies was the rigorous evaluation of promising diploids, the conversion of the best, and the introduction of at least one example of the breeding potential of the converted plant.

To accomplish this, he cultivated friendships with the best diploid breeders of the late twentieth century. These included Pauline Henry, Tom Wilson, Jack Carpenter and Josie Bomar, Darrel Apps, Doris Simpson, Sarah Sikes, and John Shooter. He also used the arts of friendship and diplomacy, coupled with annual tours of hybridizer gardens in the Southeast, to identify the most promising new tetraploids and to barter for plants, if not simply a bud with pollen. He was a master of telephone negotiation, and got pollen from a daylily called "Cindy Grace" years before it was turned over to Frank Smith and introduced as MOMENT IN THE SUN in 2005.

In the months that followed his cancer surgery in 2003, Oscie tried to wrap his scientific mind around the mysteries of his own blood sugar and the foods that would regulate it and help him maintain weight. Oscie also meditated on the miraculous in his and Dorothy's lives, and on the mysterious powers of friendship and prayer that surrounded them both. An element of acknowledgement for this inexplicable feature of their lives entered his conversations with me from time to time during Oscie's final months.

He knew for a long time that he was living on borrowed time. I remember taking my lunch to his house one day months ago, I don't know if it was fall or winter, and hearing Oscie tell me, with Dorothy present, that he had looked at the trend of his slow loss of weight and had calculated how many weeks it would take to count down to zero, if he could not do what thus far had proved impossible: to consume and retain more calories than his metabolism burned away in a day. He imagined that he would slowly consume himself.

There it was on the table, the topic no one knows how to "discuss" when someone brings it up, THE TOPIC. With friends, you have to be real; maybe with everybody. With Oscie, you didn't ever skirt the truth. Truth is all he was ever interested in, truth and using one's time well. (He always lamented hybridizers who spent their energy replicating what was already achieved.) So I looked at my two friends and I said, "nobody, including you two, expected you to be alive today, but here you are. You can count these days "bonus days," every one of them, and enjoy each one as another miracle, because it's some kind of miracle that got you this far."

As we entered the Spring, Oscie's condition became more troublesome, and I wondered if he would see another bloom season. He did see it, though he didn't have the energy to make any crosses this year, and he didn't see all of it. I saw him in hospital beds and we would talk about daylilies for an hour or so, and his mind was still there, thinking of what would be a good cross or a waste of garden space. Ultimately, he took matters in hand and insisted on a risky surgery to improve the quality of his life. It was a courageous and honorable gamble, and he didn't have the reserves of energy to recover from it. He died about ten days later, in Dorothy's arms, with simply no more energy to draw breath. That was Saturday night, July 23. Dorothy called me and his other friends Sunday morning to let us know. Oscie was buried with military honors at Jefferson Barracks on Friday morning, July 29.

There are many who equate the name Whatley with superior plant performance and distinctive floral characteristics. After about fifteen years of making crosses and throwing them away, he hit the jackpot with JAKARTA, a breakthrough yellow daylily that achieved large size with distinctive symmetry. This one caught people's attention at the 1968 AHS Convention in St. Louis and pulled the Whatley name into the spotlight. JAKARTA and JOMICO, his first registration, earned J.C. awards in 1968, and both went on to earn the Award of Merit by 1975. JAKARTA was the parent of a black-red diploid, BUDDHA, which also won an AM in 1975 and is still widely grown and marketed by the Wild Nursery in Sarcoxie, Missouri.

Just imagine: three AM awards within seven years of his first recognition. In that year of 1975, Oscie's tetraploid yellow, LAHAINA, earned a Junior Citation and went on to win the H.M in 1980. I mention LAHAINA because it is credited as being one of the primary ancestors of our modern yellow tets. Little wonder, then, that AHS bestowed the Bertrand Farr Award on him in 1984. Thirty-five of Oscie's daylilies have won the Honorable Mention.

Oscie followed his own muse in hybridizing. His mentors were Robert Griesbach and Orville Fay, Will Dill and Earl Rexroad. He was hugely influenced by color. REVOLUTE, given him by his Aunt Mary, so impressed him that he decided to be a hybridizer like his aunt. He was swept away by the color value in the Spalding line and spoke of it often. Color, plant vitality, and floral size were his chief interests.

Every cultivar he released to the world had to pass muster in his own back yard for many years. He had to like its performance from a distance, so he had no use for patterns or blends that would appear little better than "mud" from 75 feet away. He knew that some of his creations would bloom themselves out in a flash of glory, such as his ruffled yellow BONHOMIE, which he adored for the two weeks it would flower. He knew that some lacked branching or high bud count. No matter; if they were distinctive to his eye, he put them out there for the market to evaluate.

He grew very few cultivars of other hybridizers. During the past decade I saw several of John Benz's best in his garden (chief among them JANET BENZ), some from Steve Moldovan and Curt Hanson, a few of Jack Carpenter's, Patrick Stamile's, Jeff Salter's and always a few from "Van and Vic" at Iron Gate Gardens. He admired John Shooter's work with diploid whites, but could not accomplish a tetraploid conversion of John's remarkable FROSTED WINDOWS. Last winter he found himself ordering one or two new ones from nearly every catalogue. It was his way of giving people one last vote of confidence. I planted new arrivals from Karol Emmerich, Patrick Stamile, and Jack Carpenter during one of Oscie's hospital stays.

Oscie considered his MOHICAN CHIEF the best red for Midwestern summers. I have never seen it fade or suffer from rain. He considered FROST AVENUE a "dream maker" in a hybridizing program. He thought REVELLING one of his finest rose pinks. He thought the arresting form and orange-apricot color of DELIBERATE PACE one of his most important contributions, and he urged me to cross it with "everything!" His friend John Shooter thought that the huge yellow BUTTER CREAM was possibly his best, if not the huge red BEAR CLAWS.

Many people have asked me where to acquire recent Whatley cultivars. Their scarcity is due to the fact that he had very few “units” for sale at the time of introduction. The garden most likely to have Oscie’s latest creations is Ma rietta Gardens. Oscie had a long-term business relationship with John Shooter, who will evaluate and select from Oscie’s last seedling crops.

At Oscie’s memorial service, the sons spoke so eloquently of his loving encouragement as their father. David, the youngest, shared a memory of Oscie building a balsa wood glider for him. The work was meticulous. Every piece had to fit perfectly before applying glue and then the paper skin of the plane. On the day they launched it, the plane soared beautifully, and the man and his boy were thrilled with the sight of it circling in the air. It circled and spiraled and came lower and lower as it lost energy, and then it crashed into a house and shattered. The boy was stunned. The man said to the boy, “sometimes you only get one flight; better hope it’s a good one.”